

SEEING THE BIG PICTURE: THE IMAGINE DURBAN PROJECT

South Africa's first multi-racial elections in 1994 brought an end to apartheid and ushered in black majority rule, but democracy has not erased the legacy of inequality left behind. According to the World Bank, South Africa's Gini coefficient, a measure of inequality that can be compared across countries, was 62.3 in 1993 - possibly the highest in the world at the time. The residents of the township, a left-over of from the regime of segregation, still endure precarious housing, a lack of running water, and rampant crime. The conditions in these settlements contrast sharply with the prosperous city centres and affluent suburbs, which have enjoyed the benefits of Africa's largest economy.

During the 15 years, the African National Congress (ANC) has made great strides to provide services to marginalized areas, but the urge to expand has been tempered by a need to maintain the country's aging infrastructure. In 2007, state-owned power supplier Eskom was forced to begin "load-shedding" cuts to residents and businesses in the major cities because of problems with aging plants.

And in the last two years, patience is growing thin among the country's poorer residents. Independently and often spontaneously, thousands of protests have erupted around the country in the past two years in response to the lack of services. According to South African Police Service figures, the number of peaceful public protests rose from 5130 in 1997 to 9230 in 2005. But not all the reactions have been peaceful. Over the same time, the number of violent protest also rose from 880 to 932: figures that have kindled national debate about how local government can be more effectively equipped to tolerate disagreement and dissent.

More spending, less satisfaction

In South Africa's eastern coast city of Durban, local government leaders felt it was their responsibility to resolve the legacy of injustice left by apartheid. When in 1996 the 48 distinct local councils were unified into six local councils and one municipal council (eThekweni Municipality), they thought they had their chance.

In the next four years, the municipality made massive increases to spending in black African neighbourhoods on basic services such as water, roads, clinics, libraries and schools. In spite of the increased spending, however, satisfaction with government services among the city's black African residents actually declined. The number of black Africans *satisfied* with government services fell from 29 percent in 1998/99 to 22 percent in 2001/02.

The figures caused some reflection among the city's political leaders. How would they know in the future if they were doing the right things and doing them in the right way?

At a three-day retreat of political officials, it was decided that the city's planning must be participatory and outcome focused. A new role was envisioned for local government - not as provider of services to passive recipients - but as a facilitator of social action.

In this spirit, the Imagine Durban project was conceived.

Capturing Durban's imagination

From 2007 to 2009, Imagine Durban sought to engage Durban's 3.5 million residents in an integrated, long-term look at the city. The project was implemented by the municipality in conjunction with Sustainable Cities, an NGO from Vancouver, Canada; and the PLUS Network (a network of 35 cities sharing experiences in sustainability planning) who had received funding from the Canadian International Development Agency to support the project.

The main purpose of the Imagine Durban project was to develop a visionary plan that could inspire citizens, non-governmental organisations, business and government to work together to make Durban a better city. In addition to developing this plan, the Imagine Durban project promoted the availability of information regarding long-term sustainability in Durban and supported initiatives to showcase sustainability in action.

In order to develop this plan the Imagine Durban project asked a cross section of citizens within Durban questions regarding what they liked about Durban, what they did not like, what changes they would like to see, what their hopes and dreams were for the future of Durban and what they could do to make their dreams a reality. Using these answers as a starting point, six key theme areas were identified that citizens highlighted as the most important areas for collective action:

1. Creating a SAFE city
2. Promoting an ACCESSIBLE city
3. Creating a prosperous city where all enjoy SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS
4. Celebrating our CULTURAL DIVERSITY, ARTS AND HERITAGE
5. Ensuring a more ENVIRONMENTALLY SUSTAINABLE City
6. Fostering a CARING AND EMPOWERING City

The Imagine Durban project then held workshops, invited citizens to post on its blog, and hosted competitions on the best solutions to the city's problems. Based on all the creative ideas this garnered, a final draft Imagine Durban plan was developed. The plan outlines specific actions that all sectors of society can take to achieve a better city.

For each of the themes above, the plan articulates a goal. Each goal corresponds to a set of short, medium and long-term targets to provide measurable indicators of success. Finally, each theme also has corresponding strategies for achieving the targets and a set of actions to implement the strategies. These actions are tabulated according to the respective actions expected from key stakeholder groups: individuals, civil society, businesses, local government and provincial and national government. In that respect, Imagine Durban has created a radically new approach to government in Durban by recognising that all sectors are responsible for the future of the city. No longer is the municipality looking narrowly at its spending programmes; it now sees itself as a facilitator of action by others.

"We all changed by doing the Imagine Durban project," says Sogen Moodley, an urban planner at eThekweni Municipality who helped to lead the project.

Over the next two years, eThekweni Municipality will take its first steps in its new role as facilitator. The Imagine Durban team will work with the various stakeholders to get their *buy in* - to convince them to collaborate on achieving the goals set out in the Imagine Durban Plan.

Partnerships, taking time and courage

Whilst implementation is only just commencing, Imagine Durban has learned a number of lessons on how to create a collective vision for a city.

Don't go at it alone: Partnering with a non-governmental organization has made a big difference. Imagine Durban was always very warmly received, even by formerly combative groups. The mainstream press, which can be very sceptical of city initiatives, was uniquely cooperative. Even the municipal council's main opposition party gave the project its full support.

Focus on the here and now: In a context such as South Africa where residents are aggrieved about a lack of basic services, discussing "long-term" planning can cause irritation. The team instead asked respondents about their own hopes and dreams, and focused on the actions that could be implemented immediately.

Make sure your process is politically supported: Building on a tradition of community consultation, the team worked very hard from the outset to create a range of structures that gave all sectors a sense of ownership. Still, members of the project now recognize that they could have done more to engage with political leaders, and to make them ambassadors of the plan.

Mobilize young people: The experience of Imagine Durban has show that young people inject enthusiasm and excitement into a project. And young people are naturals at long-term planning since they are already so focused on the future.

Be bold and don't be afraid to experiment: As one Imagine Durban Ambassador put it: "It is often easier to apologize than to get permission!" Working a government bureaucracy with rigid procedures can sometimes limit the creative spirit. Having the courage to do things differently in such an environment is an essential asset.

Take time to critique and evaluate: Do not wait until the end of a process to take stock. Make sure that you take time continually to evaluate what has worked, and what has not. This does not have to be formal or scientific. Imagine Durban would merely get the team out of the office for a day and use a strong facilitator to ask the hard questions.

Follow through: Do not underestimate the power of keeping your word. Just doing what you said you would can help bring credibility to your process.

Communicate, communicate, communicate: Having the right set of tools for effective communication cannot be emphasized enough; it can make or break a project. Imagine Durban spared no expense to reach its stakeholders and had a senior-level communication officer who employed multiple mediums to reach a broad array of audiences.

Embrace new opportunities: Keep your eyes open for initiatives that support your outcomes. You will be amazed at how harnessing these opportunities can help create great synergies. Imagine Durban teamed up with local schools, a township renewal project and with a youth centre, to name just a few examples.

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For more information, visit www.imaginedurban.org



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